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# FIELDWORK AS COPING AND LEARNING

***Elin Sæther***

Fieldwork is based on an idea of knowledge as situated in space. To carry out fieldwork is to recognize that relevant knowledge is located in a certain place, somewhere outside the walls of your office or library. Hence, fieldwork is commonly perceived as going out *there* to conduct observations and coming back *here* to write about it. To conduct fieldwork is a process of initiations, where the fieldworker gradually crosses boundaries that separate insiders (those who are or have been *there*) from outsiders. This is a process that is saturated with insecurity, and fieldwork is thus about learning while coping with multiple sources of insecurity.

The main aim of this chapter is to show how this insecurity is an inherent aspect of the learning process that postgraduate students go through during fieldwork. All students doing research need to develop strategies for obtaining information and advice. The process of seeking information often positions the graduate or PhD student in relationships which are asymmetrical in nature. Usually the student is placed in an inferior position that may create a strong sense of having little control over the work that is so essential for getting the degree. Lack of proficiency in Chinese is only one aspect contributing to the asymmetry. The fieldworker's status as an outsider is in itself a challenging social role that it takes time to become familiar with. This comes in addition to well-known challenges of acquiring and making sense of information about the topic under investigation.

For most students, doing fieldwork for the first time involves a learning process that is characterized by trial and error. They are facing an open-ended process which might take an entirely different direction than imagined. This uncertain nature of fieldwork is both an advantage and a problem. The advantage lies in the great spectrum of possibilities involved in the process, the opportunities to gain new insight, and to develop the work in the most promising direction, as Kevin O'Brien's chapter shows. The problem is that there are no secure outcome and no guaranteed result, as everything depends on access to the right informants, their will to answer questions and the fieldworker's ability to interpret the acquired information.

Surprisingly little of this uncertainty is reflected in students' narratives, however. We tend to represent fieldwork as a linear and rational process, originating in a research design, realized through data collection in the field and ending up as a thesis or dissertation. The fieldwork accounts tend to rationalize problems and emphasize achievements. The actual experiences of fieldwork often diverge from these representations. Hence, one objective of this chapter is to present a personal narrative, which exemplifies the numerous frustrations and lack of smooth progress that constituted my PhD fieldwork in China.

Through these reflections, I wish to highlight how a learning process took place even though the fieldwork procedure did not correspond to the idealized representations. During my PhD fieldwork, I found the initial steps to be especially difficult, and imagined that my stay would end up as a complete failure. Later, I realized that the learning process was continuous, even when the fieldwork was perceived to be at a standstill. It was continuous, because it also took place while coping with daily life, spending leisure time with friends, reading newspapers, and watching TV. In the end, I actually had something to communicate about my fieldwork topic, information that had become knowledge I could use, and this discovery convinced me that in spite of problems and frustrations, fieldwork was worth doing.

## FIELDWORK AS COPING

My fieldwork experiences originate from working on a PhD project in Human Geography about critical journalism in China. I had spent some time in China before embarking on the fieldwork, and during my master's degree I spent one year on a language scholarship in Beijing. I also chose to spend one term at the beginning of my PhD to study Chinese in Shanghai. This language strategy made it possible for me to conduct interviews in Chinese, but I depended on taping them and had to rely on assistance to transcribe the interviews from the tape. For social science students who have not studied Chinese as part of their degree, the language problem can be one of the major sources of insecurity during fieldwork. There are many possible language strategies; studying Chinese is one, relying on interpreters another, but none of them can guarantee that no information is lost, as Thøgersen's chapter shows. However, insufficient language skills do not inhibit learning, even though it might complicate the process.

The objective of my PhD project is to gain an understanding of the political roles of a new kind of problem-oriented journalism in China. Before embarking on the fieldwork I had been working on a research design which outlines two complementary approaches: qualitative interviews and discourse analysis. The data comes in part from interviews with journalists about their work experiences, their perceptions of media control and limits to free expression, and their strategies and objectives. The intention is to focus on journalists working for the critical Guangzhou-based paper, *Nanfang Zhoumo*, or preferably journalists who have worked there in the past, since the paper is known to have become less radical. The second approach is a discourse analysis of Chinese newspaper articles about social problems aimed at identifying how they construe the context and the origin of these problems. This analysis will exemplify how critical journalism is regulated and how journalists use discursive techniques to expand their freedom of expression. The focus on representations is a central dimension in post-structuralist discourse analysis, which emphasizes that every representation of the social world is political. The combination of interviews and discourse analysis is intended to connect the critical journalistic practice with the discursive context in order to see how critical journalism can be understood as a concrete case embedded in the politics of reform in China.

### *Subject positions*

Through the process of doing fieldwork, a student engages in many situations where there are a limited number of possible social roles, or subject positions. The subject positions are defined in relation to different groups such as supervisors and senior scholars during the planning of the project, and informants during the fieldwork. The different subject positions have in common that the student has an inferior position, and is approaching those who know and belong. This can be seen as a liminal role. The term describes the ambiguity of being in contact with people, being connected, while remaining different (see e.g. Mohammad

2001). Hence, the inferiority connected to the fieldworker's subject position is also linked to possibilities of creating new knowledge. The liminal role is an expression of an interplay of difference and sameness. The difference is necessary because it legitimates the observation and the questions the fieldworker asks, while the construction of sameness, of some kind of common ground, is necessary because it enables communication.

One such subject position is experienced during the preparatory stage before actually entering the field. Most students who decide to work on a topic related to China will try to locate China scholars locally, nationally, and maybe also internationally. The first approach is often an e-mail where the student presents the project and asks for advice. This can be seen as the first meeting with the insider/outsider dichotomy. The student enters a subject position characterized by an asymmetrical relation with the academic insiders, who are perceived as experienced and in possession of the required knowledge about how to proceed in the research process. Moreover, seen from a student's point of view, they seem to *master* the field. They have lived there, they speak and read Chinese, and they have friends among Chinese academics and other people.

The academic insiders are often researchers and teachers who usually do their best to prepare the students for the challenges that lie ahead of them. They play a crucial role as door-openers to the field, as they can provide access to their own networks and contacts. Conversely, through their advice and requirements, they also become gatekeepers to the China field. Their suggestions signal which qualifications the student should have, or obtain, to be able to do qualified work. My first meeting with the academic insiders was at the time when I was figuring out the topic of my master's thesis and the clearest pointer was that I had to learn Chinese. This was undoubtedly good advice, but it was also part of the academic gatekeepers' screening process, which established language skills as a marker separating insiders from outsiders. Compared to other fields within the social sciences, it seems that the gatekeepers to the China field advocate rather strict requirements. The China field is characterized by a strong focus on the necessity of proficient language skills and contextual knowledge in order to do qualified academic work. This attitude probably reflects the gatekeeper's own experiences. They have spent years acquiring these skills and they want to encourage rigorous research standards. This means that the fear of not having the necessary qualifications to conduct successful fieldwork can be strengthened in the meeting with academic insiders. Their requirements and the quality of their work easily become the standard the student's own initial work is measured against. The construction of the ideal standard takes place in literature as well as in personal communication. For me, the following paragraph made an especially deep impression:

> Whereas Western universities, media, and government(s) never would regard anyone with a reading ability in English of ten pages an hour as qualified to speak with authority on British politics, a similar standard does not yet apply to China and Chinese politics. Here even those who are functionally illiterate in Chinese may become authorities. (Schoenhals 1992: 6)

This text does several things. It makes the entrance criterion to the field explicit and this immediately places most young China-students from the social sciences in an outsider position. However, the text can also be read as an effort to strengthen the status of China-research by removing its 'exotic' label. It claims that recognition as a China scholar should demand a similar level of knowledge as expert status in other fields. When the paragraph's context is taken into consideration, another aspect is revealed. Schoenhals writes this as part of an explanation of why Western scholars have ignored the crucial role of language in Chinese politics. This struck me, because an interest in the political importance of language and discourse was an important reason for my choice of research topic and design. However, understanding Schoenhals' statement literally, I should not be doing this work before I have acquired satisfactory language skills. In this sense the text can be accused of representing a very narrow conception of how valuable contributions to the social sciences can be made.

Contrary to this conception, it can be claimed that there are diverse sources of understanding. My recognition of the value of language in Chinese politics did not come from any China-specific knowledge, but rather from literature such as Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995). This literature shows how language is central in constructing political change, maintaining political hegemony and in creating our understanding of society. This is why I assumed that language had to be important in Chinese politics, and that changes in the media practice were political in nature, due to the media's central role in political communication. In other words: it should be possible to make a valuable contribution to academic research without fulfilling an absolute entrance criterion like the one Schoenhals presents here. Students should keep in mind that there is always a danger that the academic insiders, the senior China scholars, have forgotten or suppressed the memory of how the beginning of *their* learning process was.

Communicating with experienced China scholars or more experienced students is important, not only for the development of a theoretical and methodological approach, but also for a number of practical reasons. Access to those people is not easy for those of us who come from other disciplines than Sinology. I did not apply for a research visa before leaving. I was a PhD student in Human Geography at the University of Oslo, my institution had no established contacts with Chinese academic institutions, and I simply did not know how to obtain such a visa. After asking around, I concluded that it would be possible to go on a tourist visa. In the end, I went to China as the accompanying spouse of my husband (who was going to study Chinese). This did not cause any problems, but nor did it provide me with any advantages. Later, I realized that if I had contacted a few more China scholars, one of their contacts could probably have issued an invitation to me, and provided me with an affiliation with a Chinese academic institution.

### *Beginning fieldwork*

Once one has arrived in China, the outsider/insider dichotomy suddenly no longer only applies to a limited group of academics. On the contrary, the insiders are the Chinese, this multitude of people who trade, shout, walk, talk, drive and just belong in the place where the fieldworker is foreign. Arriving in a foreign place means entering a new subject position, where the fieldworker's identity is defined in relation to people who see this place as their home. To do fieldwork is a conscious way of dealing with being a foreigner. The fieldworker is acutely aware of her lack of understanding of how things work. This consciousness is rewarding in the sense that it strengthens the willingness to take notice and observe, but it can also be exhausting and frustrating.

When I arrived in Shanghai during the summer of 2002, the first few days were filled with practical arrangements and formalities, but when these things were done I was going to start. But how do you start fieldwork? The obvious way is to begin with the data collection, which in my case meant interviews. To get the first appointments, I was going to call or e-mail my contacts in China.[1] Making this initial approach was intimidating and I felt nervous and insecure. When there was no response, it seemed to me that the whole project was flawed. At this time of the summer my contacts were on holidays, on maternity leave, or about to go abroad. In short, they were not sitting there waiting for me. This should not have come as a surprise. After all, fieldwork is about going *there*, entering people's daily lives in a different place. It is not surprising that it took some time before the first interview appointments were established. However, the first two weeks of my fieldwork was the most difficult part, because the lack of progress strengthened my sense of insecurity. I felt hesitant and delayed the telephone calls that I had to make, and my own lack of progress made me feel miserable. These feelings were linked to a fear of failing, of being denied access and maybe being told that what I was doing made no sense.

### *The first interviews*

In the research proposal I had indicated approximately how many interviews there should be, with what kind of people, and how the information should be employed. While waiting for replies from the relevant contacts, I realized that there was no reason to be so selective. I started making a list of all the people I had met and talked to at some point or another in China. If only a few of them knew somebody it would be interesting to talk to, it would contribute to my understanding of Chinese media. This showed me that there were more possible entries into the field. Likewise, the research proposal focused on the press and journalists working for newspapers. When it turned out that a friend knew a journalist working for the CCTV, China's national TV station, I realized that as long as time was abundant, I should grasp every opportunity to talk to people, regardless of my previous theoretical and methodological focus.

Contrary to my expectations, the replies I finally got from the persons I had contacted in Beijing were positive. I wanted to make set appointments and was puzzled when people kept telling me to give them a call when I arrived in the city. In the Nordic countries, appointments are often made weeks in advance. Later, I realized that appointments at short notice are a common way to organize meetings in China. This is in fact a great advantage, as it makes fieldwork more flexible.

Textbooks dealing with qualitative interviews emphasize that this method is based on common conversational skills, the goal is to find out what people know, and the interviewer should be critical and always ready to make follow-up questions (Rubin and Rubin 1995). While reading through the transcripts of my first interviews, I discovered that my questions seemed to be shaped by a search for affirmation. Rather than representing an open and critical approach, they revealed that I had wanted to be reassured that my project reflected something real, something that could be identified and talked about. The questions were sometimes leading, and often longer and a lot more confusing than the answers. The language barrier contributed to this problem. During the first interviews in Chinese I found it very hard to formulate follow-up questions, as I was concentrating so hard on understanding what I was being told. Recording the interviews proved to be very useful. They were transcribed by a Chinese student and I read them to learn their content, but also to improve my questions and interview skills.

Language problems continued to be a frustration. In some interviews I brought a Chinese friend with me. She assisted in formulating questions when I prepared for the interviews and she was a great help when I wanted to summarize and analyse the interviews afterwards. During the interview, if I struggled with a question, she would help me, and as she became familiar with the topic, she sometimes asked questions herself. Her help made me more relaxed during the interview. In spite of my unsatisfactory language skills, I generally felt that I was taken seriously. As a foreigner I was not expected to know every term or understand everything, and it was legitimate to ask people to explain.

Cultural 'mistakes' of the type that how-to-do-business-in-China manuals warn you against were also accepted. Once, when my friend and I interviewed a journalist at our hotel, I asked him if he wanted tea. I perceived his answer as negative. A few minutes later his voice sounded rusty, and suddenly my friend got up and poured him a glass of tea. I realized that he had only been polite in the Chinese way. In literature about foreigners in China, such things are sometimes presented as critical failures. Even though I experienced it as very embarrassing at the time, my general impression is that foreigners are given a lot of leeway. So in a way, I was not being impolite, I was only being foreign and a bit stupid.

***Learning through interviewing***

The first interviews represented very different views on critical journalism in China. One interviewee, a university professor, was very optimistic, and felt that a new culture was being constructed, where criticism was no longer primarily perceived as subversive. His impression was that critical journalism had started locally, but would evolve towards topics of more profound importance. A CCTV journalist, on the other hand, focused on the negative impact of the hierarchical structure in Chinese media. In his view, editors are afraid of losing their positions, and carefully abstain from publishing anything that might be too critical. This journalist felt that the new freedom of the media was illusory and that the new possibilities were limited to the politically irrelevant field of consumption. He exemplified this by telling me about a program he had made about the recurrent problem of mining accidents in China. The program drew a connection between mining accidents and uneven economic development, as these dangerous mines are located in the poorest provinces. The program implied that no fundamental changes would take place as long as poverty continued to force workers to carry out dangerous work. The journalist put a great deal of effort into the program, and was disappointed and surprised when it was stopped from being broadcast. He viewed this act of censorship as an example of a permanent risk-management in Chinese media institutions. Journalists' work is evaluated in relation to the consequences it might cause, and if the editor assumes that a critical report might lead him into trouble, he will stop it. The editors face personal risk when they publish or broadcast critical journalism, and this prevents journalists from going too far. These completely opposite assessments presented an indication of the spectrum of different points of view regarding media development in China. Every research proposal represents a simplification of the empirical world. My research project was based on an idea about changes within the Chinese media. This journalist's statement claiming that the changes were politically irrelevant contradicted my preconceived conceptions. This meant that I had to include new questions in my interviews and to be open towards the possibility that the changes were less important or of a different nature than I had expected. Dealing with complexity is one of the great challenges in conducting empirical research, but it also makes it inspiring and fun.

Most interviews started out with very general questions. I presented my interest in critical journalism, and asked the journalists to talk about their work experiences. My follow up questions focused on how journalists select their material, how formal and informal regulations work and what consequences their work had caused. Some interviews contributed little to my understanding of critical journalism in China, but it was sometimes difficult to see why they failed. During one interview with a journalist who had most of his work experience in mainland China but was presently working in Hong Kong, I got the feeling that he did not want to talk. He was polite, answered my questions, but kept his answers to a minimum. The interview felt like a struggle. It was not until we started talking about new trends in the education of journalists, and how new journalists get recruited, that he showed some enthusiasm. At this point he mentioned two journalists in Beijing that I could contact. He did not have their contact information, but gave me their names and employer. Although I thought it would be difficult to trace people without having their telephone number or e-mail, this actually did not represent any major problem.[2] In the end, these two contacts turned out to be very valuable. Although the interview with the Hong Kong based journalist did not lead to many new insights, it gave me a chance to practice my interview skills. I became more aware of the importance of pursuing unexpected openings during an interview. The moment I finally found a topic he took an interest in led to the information about his contacts in Beijing.

Even after the first interviews, I still felt nervous when calling people for the first time, but it got easier with time. Towards the end of the fieldwork period, I started noticing how the interviews left me less exhausted and more satisfied. Throughout, my ambition was to let the journalists talk, and to fit in my questions where they connected to what was being told. This was very difficult in the beginning, but became easier towards the end. I was no longer asking those long and muddled questions. This had something to do with learning new concepts, becoming familiar with the interview situation, and learning to know the discursive field of critical journalism in China. My questions changed and with them the answers. Arranging the interviews seemed easier too. I, who in the beginning could hesitate for two days before making a phone call to a possible informant, would now make calls every day, without having to mobilize energy and courage to do it. My perception of my role as a foreigner and fieldworker was changing; in other words, my subject position was not as limited and inferior as in the beginning. As I became more familiar with my role, I discovered that my status as a foreigner could also be useful. The journalists often gave me an introduction to modern media history in China, and by telling this history they presented the context which framed their own work experiences.

I found that my role as a foreigner made it easier to admit ignorance, and it seemed that my foreignness also encouraged the insiders to tell their stories in a detailed way. As a foreigner I could ask questions about the self-evident without causing too much annoyance, and in this sense foreignness contributed in a positive way. Sameness, on the other hand, implies a common frame of understanding which means that the communication is perceived as meaningful. In constructing sameness, the fieldworker uses part of her own identity to connect with the person she is talking to. Sameness can be constructed around nearly anything. In interviews with critical journalists I often tried to construct a feeling of sameness around political views, as questions concerning poverty, uneven development and injustice were areas where a feeling of sameness could be expected. Sometimes I used gender issues to connect. In a discussion with a female editor about coverage of domestic violence in the news, I was using feminist discourse to build sameness between us. I do not perceive the construction of sameness as false play acting, but sometimes I may have stretched my identity fragments more than I was comfortable with.

## INVISIBLE LEARNING AND TACIT KNOWLEDGE

During fieldwork, the learning process is often hidden, which means it is difficult to identify progress. During my time in China, the sense of failure never completely left me. I felt that I should have been more active and have created more opportunities. A sense of failure makes it difficult to describe the fieldwork experience in an open way. A common fear among fieldworkers is that admitting difficulties will undermine the entire value of the work. However, the rationalization of fieldwork experiences means that the gradual, or tacit, learning involved in the process often remains invisible. The reason for this might be that the tacit learning does not happen in clearly demarcated stages, it simply seemed to be there by the time of departure. The aim of the last part of this chapter is to reflect on the different ways learning takes place during fieldwork, and to argue that a move away from writing rationalized, linear representations of fieldwork will enable students to understand how the learning process depends on their failures as well as on their successes.

### *Outside the interview situation*

Much of my learning took place when I was not interviewing or collecting data. Most of my time was actually spent on things other than doing interviews, especially in the beginning, and I often found I was wasting time. It was a relief when the Chinese university semester started and a few friends came back to the city. I started studying newspaper texts together with a Chinese student, and was spending time discussing relevant topics and searching for texts together with a friend of mine who studied at Fudan University. This helped me improve my language skills and get some perspectives on how newspaper texts could be understood. I was also working with a research assistant who transcribed my interviews. I could then read the transcriptions in Wenlin, a software program with a Chinese-English dictionary. If there were sentences or expressions that I found difficult to understand, she could explain. She also assisted in collecting text material, and we spent several days together at Shanghai Library, looking for relevant articles. I found it inspiring and useful to work together with these Chinese students and believe they contributed a lot to my learning process.

### *Failures as a source for learning*

While I was in China obstacles to progress felt like failures. My location was a major reason why the fieldwork did not develop gradually, but during short, intensive periods. Shanghai was clearly not the best place to study critical journalism in China. This was surprising to me, because the advice I was given before starting on the project pointed to Shanghai as a good location. My efforts to identify informants among journalists in Shanghai only resulted in very few names. Late in the fieldwork I found out that Shanghai's propaganda department was more restrictive than its counterparts in Beijing and Guangzhou, which led to a relative lack of innovative journalism.[3] The result was that most of my interviews with journalists took place in other places. The location problem had a negative influence on the number of interviews I made, and it was a constant source of frustration. However, this problem became part of a crucial understanding of geographical differences and their influence on the possible scope and content of criticism in Chinese newspapers. In fact, I learnt something important from choosing a non-ideal location.

Another obstacle that turned out to have a positive side was the 16th Party Congress in November 2002. At first it seemed to delay my work, because journalists became more cautious. In October, when I e-mailed a contact in Guangzhou and told him that I was planning to come, his response was clear: 'Nobody here wants to talk to foreigners now'. The reason was increased surveillance because of the Party Congress. I mentioned this in an interview with two Xinhua editors in Beijing, and one of them expressed his surprise and declared that he did not experience any such special restrictions. These differences in the perceptions of control and freedom were important information to me. They made me more aware of the great variation between media institutions, and between different journalists. The different perceptions of control and vulnerability were highlighted when a journalist explained to me the probable reason why his colleague never responded to my e-mail or telephone messages. This person had been central in the development of *Nanfang Zhoumo*, and he had lost his job after giving an interview to a French journalist. Even though I did not succeed in interviewing this journalist, it nevertheless taught me something about the risk some of my informants faced in their daily work.

### *Tacit learning*

When all different sources of learning are taken into consideration, it becomes obvious that the learning process is going on throughout the whole fieldwork. In my case, I learnt about China while I was establishing a daily life in Shanghai. I was learning through conversations with students and friends (both Chinese and foreign), and by having to face obstacles, in addition to the learning process connected to the interviews. During almost every interview something was added to my understanding: the non-verbal information, the way things are told, body language, laughter, and omissions, which can also be a source of increased understanding. Through doing interviews in Chinese, my vocabulary increased, which probably also contributed to a sense of progress towards the end of my stay.

Being in China means being involved in a multitude of interactions. Living in a neighborhood, eating in restaurants, taking trains and taxis, shopping, dealing with formalities, spending time with informants, Chinese students, friends, and studying language – these experiences can all be understood as connecting points between the fieldworker and the local context. In addition, there are other textual and visual connections, such as reading newspapers and magazines (both English-language publications and Chinese), watching television and Chinese movies, listening to music or radio, observing people, street decorations and festivities. Media representations are a rich source for understanding the framing of different problems, which connotations they carry, and how they are valued in Chinese public discourse. Through everyday interactions the fieldworker can learn about local understandings of the world, about local problems, and about what is considered fun or repulsive, important or trivial. Some of this knowledge is tacit, which makes it difficult to describe. Nevertheless, tacit knowledge is easy to recognize among those who share it, and because of this it plays a crucial role in the data collection, that is, in the learning of codified knowledge.

This shared knowledge is important in developing an interpretative framework for understanding one's research topic. The knowledge about how certain topics are represented will be reflected in the interview questions. Through communicating an understanding of a phenomenon, the fieldworker expresses a common starting point, which facilitates the later exchange of viewpoints and information. In my case, the preparations for the 16th Party Congress, with its flower decorations, front page portraits of the CCP leadership, and red banners became something we could joke about during the interview, demonstrating that we had a shared understanding of the spectacle connected to Chinese politics.

***Writing***

Writing is probably the best way to become aware of the new knowledge that develops during fieldwork. Keeping a fieldwork diary ensures that the early experiences, which after some time seem prosaic and commonplace, do not disappear. This is important in being able to reflect on the learning process. In the final part of the fieldwork period, the knowledge gained during the first few weeks will often seem banal and self-evident. But the learning that took place during the initial stage was important in the process, and it will probably be important information for the future readers of the thesis too.

It is difficult to write about failures. In any representation of fieldwork, there are days that are omitted just because nothing happened. Days wasted watching American DVDs, reading spy novels or in other profitless ways. I cannot claim that these days contributed much to my understanding of the critical press in China. Still, they were there, in between the days when things were happening, as days where the feeling of insecurity and failure crushed the ability to cope with that insecurity and move on. Those days are difficult, as much because they are so very much out of place in fieldwork discourse, which emphasizes the active approach taken by the fieldworker. The empty days made me doubt the entire project, or at least question my ability to get something done that later could contribute to academic discourse.

There are many normative statements within fieldwork discourse. In addition to constructing a particular image of the fieldworker, the different social relations within fieldwork are graded. Friendships with key informants are very highly ranked, while interactions in the tourist field are regarded as low value. The ranking reflects the perceived degree of difficulty in establishing the relation. The lack of established high status relations might become another source of a feeling of failure. Alternatively, instead of estimating the value of the connections against a preconceived value scale, it is much more useful to use the writing process to reflect on how these connections contributed to the research, and to the understanding of the field.

The writing process following fieldwork will be familiar to most students, even though it has its own challenges. Seen from the depressed viewpoint of the wasted days, coming home and dropping plastic bags filled with materials down on the desk can be quite a relief. Suddenly, it seems like you have actually done something, that time has been well spent. At home, you are cut off from the context from which your materials originate, where people are familiar with the world that you want to write about, and suddenly you relate only to a fragment of all the things that are going on in China.

As the writing process begins, many master and PhD students ask themselves what they can possibly write on the basis of their material. It seems very usual to doubt the quality of one's data. This partly reflects the insecurity connected to the fieldwork process, but some of the distrust of the material is probably caused by the remnants of positivism that most of us still carry with us. As the social sciences have moved towards a post-positivist paradigm, ideas about the objective researcher have been criticized and undermined, but positivist thinking still seems to influence the experiences of fieldwork. Even in qualitative work, which does not aim to generalize the empirical findings, 30 interviews still sound better than 12. It does not seem to matter that neither 12 nor 30 interviewees make a representative selection. If the qualitative method is taken seriously, the number of interviews in itself is uninteresting. What is important is the kind of interviews, observations and interactions, and what the fieldworker gets out of them. This is not intended as an argument against rigorous fieldwork methods, but as an argument for utilizing and recognizing the richness of the learning process involved in fieldwork. Based on the multiple sources of learning, it is possible to communicate a story which will be a meaningful addition to academic discourse.

## CONCLUSION

Fieldwork is an open-ended process without clear procedures. Young researchers, MA and PhD students, are expected to produce valuable academic research, but doing fieldwork for the first or second time often leads to a feeling of not mastering the situation. During the planning process and the initial part of fieldwork, the student is an outsider in the field who approaches people with expert knowledge. In addition, representations of fieldwork often establish an idealized version of the process, where all the trying and failing remains hidden. The representations create a stark contrast to the experience of fieldwork as an untidy and frustrating process. All of this contributes to insecurity.

Coping with insecurity means finding strategies that make the project move forward or identifying alternative approaches to the topic in cases where the process is at a standstill. In spite of problems and frustrations, most fieldworkers find that towards the end of their time in China they are able to explain to others the case they have been working on, and they are able to situate this case in a context. This knowledge is in part a result of the information gathered through interviews or other forms of data collection, but it is also due to the tacit knowledge obtained during the process of fieldwork. This is the learning that grows out of the interaction with Chinese people in everyday life. Acquiring tacit knowledge is a precondition for understanding how things work, because it creates a common interpretative repertoire, which enables communication between outsiders and insiders. Towards the end of fieldwork, the initial subject position characterized by insecurity and inferiority will usually have changed.

The fieldwork process will always be a challenge for new students who enter the field. However, new representations of fieldwork, which include the problems as well as the multifarious ways of learning can contribute to less insecurity. Senior scholars can share their own initial experiences, and in this way students will know that the frustrations they face are part of every fieldwork process. Facing problems and obstacles is an inherent aspect of the learning process, and cannot be avoided, but making them part of our common fieldwork discourse will make them signs of a learning process instead of indications of failure.

### Notes

1 To connect to the Internet from your computer is easy in China.
2 There is a telephone information service in every province. You can call 114 to ask for telephone numbers and addresses, or ask somebody else to make the call for you.
3 There are now signs that the Shanghai media will catch up with the other cities. The propaganda department has a new leader, and a new newspaper has been established, which has recruited several established journalists known for their critical and investigative work (Wiest and Cheung 2003).

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